Journal of Human Rights Practice Advance Access published January 20, 2015

POLICY AND PRACTICE NOTE

Empowering Unheard Voices through 'Theatre of the Oppressed': Reflections on the Legislative Theatre Project for Women in Afghanistan—Notes from the Field

HUMA SAEED*

Abstract

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan helped create an image of Afghan women existing simply behind the burqa—a voiceless victim needing outsiders to rescue her. A review of western media reporting, campaigns and books and articles written about Afghan women illustrates an overwhelming tendency to exemplify—or symbolize—Afghan women with images of them dressed in the pleated blue burqa. This was particularly obvious right after the events of 11 September 2001, when books on Afghan women proliferated. This reflection is an attempt to echo those stories that often do not make it into the mainstream media. These stories come from an innovative, art-based project called 'Legislative Theatre: Democratizing Women's Rights in Afghanistan'—a form of participatory theatre or 'theatre of the oppressed', as developed by Augusto Boal. In a traditional society such as Afghanistan, where it is primarily men who occupy public spaces for discourse, women have few chances to gain access to the public sphere. As such, this lack of visibility, in and of itself, has made it easier to report on them as being helpless. During the last decade, however, certain opportunities presented themselves to broaden women's participation in the public sphere, such as the genre of theatre under discussion here. This project therefore was an important platform to create opportunities for women to speak out and have their opinions heard. It also served as an occasion to see the other side: the enthusiasm, energy and bravery that many women exhibited in order to challenge norms and question the status quo in the face of formidable circumstances; the collective efforts and voices that are translated into political agency; and the strength coming from the inside—even if they are behind the blue garment.

Keywords: Afghan women; empowerment; forum theatre; legislative theatre; theatre of the oppressed; women's rights

* A recipient of the Jack Kent Cooke Graduate Scholarship, Huma Saeed (huma.saeed@law.kuleuven.be) is a PhD candidate at the Leuven Institute of Criminology (University of Leuven), where she focuses on the intersection between the violation of socio-economic rights and state crime in the context of transitional justice with Afghanistan as a case study. She has worked with human rights and women's rights organizations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and internationally as well as with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Afghanistan.

Journal of Human Rights Practice Vol. 0 | Number 0 | Month 2015 | pp. 1–28 DOI:10.1093/jhuman/huu028

'Theater is a weapon. A very efficient weapon.' —Augusto Boal

Introduction

A quick Internet search on Afghan women brings pages and pages of images overwhelmingly depicting them as mutilated, burned or covered under the blue burqa. The mutilated Aisha, who was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in July 2010; the self-immolated Gulbar who was admitted at a hospital in Ghor province in northern Afghanistan in November 2005; and so on. The situation of women in Afghanistan is grave beyond doubt. Even after the fall of the Taliban and, paradoxically, after their so-called liberation with the intervention of the international community, stories of forced marriages, suicide, mutilation by husbands or other family members, and rapes are reported very frequently. According to a report published in 2013 by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), 4,154 cases of violence against women were documented during the first half of the year (AIHRC 2013). In its 2014 annual report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) warns of a worsening status of women in the country. In particular the report points to President Karzai's endorsement of a statement by members of the national religious council where women are called secondary citizens. Moreover, the law on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted in 2009, is largely unenforced. As a result, women and girls who escape domestic violence or forced marriages are locked in prison cells as criminals instead of being considered victims (HRW 2014). In a recent incident, on 23 August 2014, four women were gang raped by armed men on their way back from a wedding near Kabul. This shocked the nation, with many protests across various provinces. Five men accused of gang rape and armed robbery were hanged a few weeks later after a trial of questionable fairness. And the list can go on.

However, as the saying goes, where there is oppression there is resistance. Nevertheless, this resistance, as the other side of the coin, has hardly been portrayed through the mainstream media. At best, success stories are mainly measured in numbers: the percentage of girls attending schools; female representation in the parliament; a decrease in the maternal mortality rate, and so on. While these figures are important in their own right, they do not necessarily depict the resilience that many Afghan women have shown in the face of formidable challenges. As such, the Afghan woman continues to remain faceless; or, to be more precise, her image continues to linger behind the burqa. Only numbers and percentages tend to represent the success of 'liberating' Afghan women from the outside, not the internal struggles and sacrifices that many women undergo on a daily basis in order to gain their basic rights.

Seeking to describe how society creates 'women', Simone de Beauvoir wrote 'One is not born a woman, but becomes one'. If I take the liberty to adapt this to Afghanistan, I would like to assert that Afghan women are not born silent,

burqa-shrouded victims, but they have become such in the Western media and policy debates. A review of western media reporting, campaigns and books and articles written about Afghan women illustrates an overwhelming tendency to exemplify—or symbolize—them with their images dressed in the pleated blue burqa. This was particularly obvious right after the events of 11 September 2001, when books on Afghan women proliferated—most of them filling the front cover with the famous blue image or the famous 'B' word, as if the fate of Afghan women was inextricably linked with this phenomenon. Examples include *Behind the Burqa* (2002), *The Women of Afghanistan after the Taliban* (2002), *Parvana* (2002), and *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (2007). Even books that supposedly reflected Afghan women's resistance could not apparently be published without this symbol, such as *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom* (2003), or *Unveiled Courage* (2002). This powerful symbol—without necessarily referring to the content of the works mentioned—has produced a portrait of the Afghan woman as somebody without agency and without capacity and will to struggle in order to change her own circumstances. The Afghan woman then becomes somebody only worthy of outsiders' pity and needing outsiders to rescue and liberate her.

Although some may argue that the burqa has become a symbol not only of Afghan women but of the country itself, and that it does not necessarily create an image of powerlessness, as a women's rights activist I have come across numerous situations in the Western world where upon learning about my identity, expressions of surprise were raised because I was not wearing a burqa and because I spoke for myself and acted independently. It was therefore not unusual to face questions such as: What made you different? How come you are not wearing a burqa? But you speak good English!—and so on and so forth. What I find to be most perturbing is the fact that rather than being looked upon as an individual—like anyone else—with one's own face, history, capacity, ideas—and yes, agency, one is automatically being placed in an invented, pre-assumed 'category'. This personal experience, combined with the overall reporting on Afghan women, has instilled a tendency that women from Afghanistan are mainly seen and judged through this prism. Sometimes these images and the stories of powerlessness are 'sold' to the world with such force that the condition of Afghan women under the Taliban regime and their 'liberation' became one of the cornerstones giving legitimacy to the international intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, as famously declared by Laura Bush in her radio address on 17 November 2001.[1]

This policy and practice note is an attempt to reflect those stories that often do not make it into the mainstream media. These stories come from an innovative, art-based project called 'Legislative Theatre: Democratizing

1 The full transcript of the speech can be found at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24992 (referenced 10 April 2004).

Women's Rights in Afghanistan'—a form of participatory theatre or theatre of the oppressed. In a traditional society such as Afghanistan, where it is men who primarily occupy public spaces for discourse, women have few chances to gain access to the public sphere. As such, this lack of visibility, in and of itself, has made it easier to report on them as being helpless. During the last decade, however, certain opportunities presented themselves to broaden women's participation in the public sphere, such as the genre of theatre under discussion here. This project therefore was an important platform to create opportunities for women to speak out and have their opinions heard. It also served as an occasion to see the other side: the enthusiasm, energy and bravery that many women exhibited in order to challenge norms and question the status quo in the face of formidable circumstances; the collective efforts and voices that are translated into political agency; and the strength coming from the inside—even if they are behind the 'blue' garment. It is particularly in the presence of various layers of adversity borne by many Afghan women that such stories gain momentum, especially when they come up from the grassroots through an arts-based project, the theatre of the oppressed.

The reflections here primarily entail the author's experience as the legislative theatre project manager for a period of six months. Although my job involved the overall oversight of the venture, I was particularly engaged in the advocacy and networking segment of the work, where I met with numerous local civil society organizations, members of parliament and government officials. I was also responsible for conducting background research as a component of the project, mainly looking at various Afghan laws that concern women. I am not a participatory theatre practitioner, however, and accordingly my participation at the workshops was mainly that of an observer and note-taker, not as a facilitator. I have worked as an activist with various local and international organizations over the years, particularly on gender-related issues. However, this experience was my first exposure to such a methodology as a vehicle for outreach and change. I was moved by it—moved in particular by the fact that so many women in remote corners of the country wanted to participate actively in a gesture to voice the problems in their daily lives and to demand change through this means. The reflections here come primarily from my notes in the field, reports and documents as well as numerous subsequent long-distance interviews with a number of practitioners in an attempt to follow up on later developments. Therefore, this work is largely based on my own understanding and interpretation of the situation and is thus necessarily partial. A particular limitation is that, as my participation was for a shorter period than the actual length of the project, my day-to-day attendance was mainly in the activities in Kabul and Bamyan provinces—although I have closely followed the project's evolution overall.

This policy and practice note will unfold through a number of layers. Following an introductory and background section on the theatre of the oppressed, including legislative theatre that is the primary concern of the

paper, the next section will elaborate on the legislative theatre project. A brief introduction will lead to sections on how this work was made possible in the context of Afghanistan and how it can be seen as an empowering and transformative experience for Afghan women. I will then discuss certain challenges, including security concerns for both practitioners and participants, followed by a recommendation section and conclusion.

Theatre of the oppressed

Influenced by Paolo Freire's work on the pedagogy of the oppressed, theatre of the oppressed was founded by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian dramatist, activist and politician who revolutionized the role of theatre by considering it as a means for radical change in society. In his seminal book *Theater of the Oppressed* (1979), while criticizing the role of the mainstream theatre as a tool of ruling-class control, where they divide the arena into actors and spectators, Boal argued that the main objective of the theatre of the oppressed is to change the spectators from passive beings into subjects and actors; in other words into 'spect-actors'. Moreover, he suggested that by assuming the protagonist role, the 'spect-actor' 'tries out solutions' and 'discusses plans for change' (1979: 122), thus using theatre as a weapon, a weapon to change and challenge power.

Boal's theatrical methodology as a means for social change has been employed in many different parts of the world and in various settings and capacities. From prisons to university institutions and educational projects to gender-based violence prevention programmes—all have found the approach a way to engage the community, not only to voice their concerns but also to come up with solutions to the predicaments they face in their day-to-day lives (Singhal 2004; Brigell 2010). As such, Boal's work has broken many boundaries—geographical, class, and gender, to mention but a few. Not only has it been practised in many developing countries to engage and empower communities in a dialogical process under the title of Theatre for Development (Kerr 1991), but also in many parts in the developed world.[2]

Apart from its application in 'normal' circumstances, theatre of the oppressed has also been used as a means for conflict transformation in places plagued by war and atrocities. Search for Common Ground (SFCG) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, has employed participatory theatre where during a period of two years over 600 performances were conducted in front of more than 500,000 participants. Based on this experience, it has developed a training manual called 'Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation' (SFCG, undated), the foreword of which says:

2 According to the Search for Common Ground guidelines, there are many ways to refer to this genre of theatre that are often used interchangeably: 'development theatre', 'theatre for the oppressed', 'popular theatre', 'community theatre', 'intervention theatre', 'protest theatre' and 'theatre for social change' (SFCG, undated).

> SFCG in the DRC hopes that this manual will be an inspiration to creative artists throughout the world, but particularly those living and working in conflict zones, where amidst emergency food distribution and vaccination campaigns the relevance of artists is often questioned. SFCG believes that it is particularly in such dire situations that artists have a role, a responsibility and an opportunity to employ their creative talents. Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation is a way for artists to apply their creative energy to the cause of lasting peace.

Using this form of theatre, they were able to engage communities at large to 'think', 'talk', and question the status quo, and to offer an approach to the problems raised. By means of the elements of dialogue, active participation and ownership of the practice, they advanced the process of changing norms in their society and overcoming its challenges.

Legislative theatre

Employing the philosophy of the theatre of the oppressed, Boal later used theatrical techniques to generate solutions to real life problems through public forums to make or amend laws in a democratic and participatory manner, known as legislative theatre (Boal 1998).[3] It uses different techniques and methodologies of participatory theatre, such as forum theatre. Forum theatre puts ordinary people at centre stage and engages them as political subjects that not only name and act out burning societal issues, but also (and more importantly), collectively propose solutions to problems. Legislative theatre takes the issue to another level. The goal is to gather suggestions and recommendations to a particular problem or set of problems raised through the public forums and to ultimately turn them into a legal report that can then be submitted to the legislature—with specific proposals to create or modify a certain law or public policy. In other words, it is a bottom-up law-making procedure where people themselves decide the change they want to see in their day-to-day lives; it is to 'create laws that reduce oppression' (Martin 2006: 24). Boal calls this transitive democracy—an alternative to the failures of representative democracy—where through participation and dialogue the public engages with each other on the one hand and with the government on the other in an attempt to change society (Boal 1998). Using this methodology, Boal himself was able to introduce or modify 13 laws in the city of Rio de Janeiro during his years as a city councillor. The methodology has been used in the UK, France and Canada among other countries. In Canada for example, in 2003 the Headlines Theatre and Vancouver City Council used the theatre as a vehicle for the public to communicate with government on the question of welfare cuts (Gallant 2004).

3 Boal served as a City Councillor of Rio de Janeiro from 1993 to 1997, where he developed legislative theatre.

Theatre of the oppressed in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has a long history of poetry and traditional storytelling where for centuries they have echoed the 'history, tradition, myths, religious epics, daily lives, emotions and pride of landscape' (Siddiqui et al. 2014: 123). In a country with low levels of literacy, poetry and oral storytelling have served as a means not only to preserve history but also to voice societal concerns—in particular reflecting upon issues of inequality and justice—and to call for change. Realizing this important tradition, theatre initiatives around issues of transitional justice were started in the country in 2008 by the AIHRC, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), and continued with the support of the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ).[4] The initiative entailed presenting 'both traditional and participatory theatre techniques, including Theatre of the Oppressed and the Playback Theatre, to Afghan human rights activists interested in developing cultural approaches to transitional justice in the country' (ibid: 125). Out of this work, in 2009, a group of young human rights activists established the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO) as an independent, non-governmental and non-profit organization. The organization is committed to promoting democracy and a culture of non-violence by employing a 'variety of arts and theatre-based programs that create spaces for dialogue, peace-building, social justice, public participation and consequently societal transformation from the grassroots up'.[5] In particular, AHRDO's activities are tailored towards marginalized groups, such as women and victims of war.

Since its inception, AHRDO has carried out a number of different projects, mainly with victims of war in different provinces. Since 2010, the organization has undertaken a two-phase project exclusively on women and gender issues where it has employed legislative theatre techniques. The first phase focused on the key challenges faced by Afghan women where mainly female participants were engaged in the process. The second phase looks at Afghan women's rights through the eyes of Afghan men.[6] The reflections here are based on the first phase, at the time of the author's own involvement in that process.

4 It is important to mention that traditionally theatre activities have existed in the country in only a limited way, mainly confined to a few big cities. The decades-long wars left their scars on this aspect of cultural life as well, in particular under the rule of the Taliban regime. As a result, even the little that existed before the wars had to be revived under the Karzai administration. Moreover, the conservative side of Afghan culture attaches a level of stigma to activities related to public performances—from theatre, to singing, to dance, etc., particularly for women. The young generation, however, have continually been challenging this aspect during the last decade. As a result, attitudes towards public performances, including women performers, seem to be changing slowly. Nevertheless, the conservative elements in society continue to condemn such activities for women.

5 From AHRDO's mission statement http://www.ahrdo.org/about/hm (referenced 30 March 2014).

6 The second phase is at its concluding stages as this paper is being written. According to one of AHRDO's practitioners, who took part in both phases, looking at women's rights through

Legislative theatre: democratizing women's rights in Afghanistan

The legislative theatre project started in the fall of 2010 with funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The aim was to engage Afghan women from all walks of life to voice some of the burning societal concerns faced by them and to propose solutions and recommendations that would eventually make their way to the legislature. Due to financial and security constraints, as well as AHRDO's access and experience, the project was implemented in five regional provinces: Kabul, Bamyan, Herat, Nangarhar, and Balkh, and in total engaged around 5,000 women in the course of less than two years through the various participatory theatre methodologies and techniques. Of these, around 100 women took part in the workshops and the rest were present at public performances. During the performances, a local legal expert was present to take note of the issues raised in order to analyse their implications for the country's law and policymaking procedure. At the end, the most pertinent issues were included in a final 38-page report, which in February 2012 was presented to the legislature (AHRDO 2012). It is important to note that apart from engaging ordinary Afghan women, other actors such as civil society groups, provincial representatives and certain state officials were also consulted throughout, for one thing, to ensure a wide spectrum of representation, and, for another, to secure their support.

A platform for all, for dialogue and for participation

The legislative theatre project served as a venue where many women from different walks of life participated. This is significant considering that the cause of Afghan women since the fall of the Taliban has remained limited to a small circle of educated, elite women who are mainly active in the capital city, Kabul, and other major cities. But in this project, while on the one hand it was important to have a representative group of women participants, emphasis was placed on including marginalized voices. According to the leading female practitioner of the legislative theatre, around 80 per cent of those who were involved in the activities—both during workshops and later at the public performances—were uneducated, rural women (stated in interview with the author, 16 June 2014, Kabul). The rest of the participants were university and high school students, professionals such as teachers and lawyers, and representatives from the NGO sector. The composition of participants also ensured a wide range of age groups, with those present ranging from 16 to 35 to 60 and 80 years old. More importantly, the women represented different ethnic groups such as Tajik, Hazara and Pashtun. Afghanistan is divided into a wide array of multi-ethnic and multilinguistic groups. Therefore, in any given

the eyes of Afghan men has been an even more interesting and important experience. She expressed the need for many more such initiatives with Afghan men (interviewed on 26 March 2014, Herat).

context, especially in the public sphere, the question of ethnicity plays an important role. In particular, this historical division gained further momentum when ethnic and linguistic differences served as an important cornerstone during the factional fighting among various Islamic fundamentalist parties in the civil war of 1992–96. The same applied under the subsequent Taliban regime when on many occasions being of a different ethnicity than theirs meant loss of life, torture or imprisonment.[7] Against this backdrop, it was therefore noteworthy to see a wide spectrum of representation in terms of ethnicity and a genuine level of unity among women regardless of their ethnic differences.

This level of participation among those women whom the Western world might ordinarily have seen as nonentities was the first step to overturn the belief that Afghan women were merely passive victims. There is no doubt that in a conformist and traditional society like Afghanistan, where the majority of women are illiterate,[8] outside activities are at best confined to the doctor's visit, family gatherings and other domestic affairs. However, by coming forward in their thousands to this initiative, participants in fact declared that, if opportunities and tools are provided, Afghan women are willing and ready to experience something that would lead to change in their lives, even in the face of formidable challenges, as expressed in the experience of one participant in the AHRDO report (2012: 27):

> On one of the mornings of the theatre workshop in Jalalabad, one female participant sneaked out of her house after her husband had left for work. Unfortunately, one of her male neighbors saw her leave the house and aggressively confronted her, prohibiting her from going to the workshop. However, once the woman had gone back inside, she waited for a while and then 'escaped' via the roof of the house, safely making it to the workshop.

It is noteworthy to underline the importance of the collective nature of the legislative theatre project in this context and how this emphasis on collectivity provided the occasion for women's participation and subsequent empowerment. The woman in the above-mentioned example might have not dared to take the risk if her action was not part of a group. In the face of a strong culture of conformity, group action seems to be one of the viable channels where an established tradition can be confronted and challenged and where an individual can find the necessary support and strength to step 'outside the box'. According to one of the AHRDO facilitators, group action brings collective energy, which in turn is important in building individual self-confidence.

7 The majority of the Taliban in power in Afghanistan from 1996–2001 belonged to the Pashtun ethnic group.

8 According to the CIA World Factbook, it is estimated that only 12.6 per cent of women (age 15 and over) in Afghanistan are able to read and write. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html (referenced 24 June 2014).

Recruitment of participants

Participants were recruited and invited, both for the workshops and the public performances, through various means across the five provinces. As a human rights NGO, the most obvious route for AHRDO was to ask other organizations to introduce participants. Another means was AHRDO's connections from previous projects and activities with victims of war where key people were identified as long-term partners who played an important role in identifying participants for the legislative theatre. Another method of recruitment was carried out through the representatives of communities, called *Wakil-e Guzar* or County Councillor/Representative. A *Wakil-e Guzar*, which is an officially recognized position, is often a notable person from a particular community or neighbourhood who is entrusted with the responsibility to represent his/her community, in particular conveying their concerns and needs to government officials. This person can play a key role in making a project successful or otherwise, as will be demonstrated in an example below. However, the most important means through which many contacts were established was AHRDO members' personal connections. In a society like Afghanistan, where institutional relationships in the modern sense are less developed, personal connections—specifically with certain key figures—remain an important entry point to a larger community. What this personal connection conveys, above all, is a relationship of mutual trust, which plays a vital role in how social relations are structured and constructed. The logic here goes as follows: I trust you and therefore through you the rest of the community and vice versa. This personal trust, which can mean anything from being assured of the acquaintance's level of honesty, to knowing his/her background and community ties, to the person's overall reputation in his/her respective community, is especially significant when the goal of accessing a community involves women and gender-related issues, a sensitive topic in most parts of the country.

Thinking strategically, AHRDO employed this technique to access and recruit women participants, particularly in certain remote and conservative districts and villages. For example, a member's personal connections in the eastern province of Nangarhar played a key role in recruiting participants and in the overall implementation of the project in a number of districts. Through his key contact point, he was able to contact the *Wakil-e Guzar* of a neighbourhood in one of the districts. An open-minded person who supported the cause, the *Wakil-e Guzar* first encouraged his own wife and daughter to take part in the project activities. Moreover, he provided space in his own residence for workshops to take place. Such gestures in turn created an atmosphere of trust in the neighbourhood, which opened the way for other families who eventually agreed to allow women to come forward. It is important to point out that in the patriarchal society of Afghanistan, a man's role in the family, as father, husband, brother or son, as well as in the community at large, is significantly present in the day-to-day activities of women. Seeking permission

from the male authority therefore still remains a central element in the family and community fabric. The recruitment process thus signifies the importance of building links with the key and influential figures within the community, who more often than not happen to be men, and their crucial role in introducing a new phenomenon that could potentially lead to women's empowerment. This is critical particularly in the rural and more conservative areas where the notion of community, and thus conformity, is further embedded due to the stronger presence of the centuries-old traditions. Once it is possible to seek this permission and support, it is much more feasible and safe, both for participants and facilitators, to carry out the activities within the community. Paradoxical as it may sound, this is an essential part of the practice of 'Afghanization' of any project that aims to be realistic and successful.

Once initial contacts were made, and thus enough trust was established between the communities/individuals and the organization, around 15–20 women were recruited through one of the above-mentioned channels in the province where the workshop was to take place. This was the number necessary to start the week-long workshop. Participants were given lunch (often prepared in the site of the workshops),[9] and transportation expenses. The majority of participants were 'housewives', mainly living within an extended family, who could spare some time each day to attend the workshops. As for others—that is, high school and university students—the organizers were careful to arrange workshops during school holidays. Alternatively, these participants would ask for leave if it coincided with their lessons and compensate for it later. After the formal introduction to the project, the methodology and the organization, as well as personal introductions among the participants, during the first day, participants were ready to launch the workshops, where activities were conducted through game playing led by an AHRDO facilitator.

Workshop activities with games

Games play a central role in the methodology of theatre of the oppressed. Each one is developed with the intention that it afterwards leads to discussions and reflections about self and the social phenomenon in question. According to the practitioners of the Forum Project, game playing 'allows participants to stretch the limits of their imaginations, demechanize habitual behaviors and deconstruct and analyze societal structures of power and oppression' (The Forum Project 2014). AHRDO employs about 230 different types of games. For the legislative theatre project, the practitioners spent two to three weeks choosing the most pertinent games that would help facilitate the workshops' discussions around the question of women's rights in Afghanistan: the challenges, dilemmas and recommendations for potential solutions. Eventually,

9 In the Afghan system it is still very common for every office to have a kitchen and a cook to prepare lunch for the staff. This applies to both governmental and non-governmental organizations.

80–90 games were carefully chosen; 10 or 12 of these were practised each day of the week-long workshops in a logical sequence, each leading to a discussion session afterwards and a final play.

A typical session started with games of confidence building. Given that participants were unknown to each other and also were new to the organization and the novel techniques, it was deemed important to first create an atmosphere where they could feel comfortable in each other's presence. Therefore, the goal of game playing at this level was twofold: 1) to create better acquaintance and to build confidence; and therefore 2) to create an environment where participants could express their views during the discussion sessions. The facilitator, for example, would start with a game called 'Blind Spot' where participants had to find an object in the room with closed eyes. Another such game was called 'Blind Car', played in groups of two. One person would perform as a 'car' and the other as a 'driver', and they would switch roles. The driver, who was obviously in control, with open eyes, would lead the other person (performing as the car with closed eyes). Afterwards, in a group session they would discuss the feeling each position—controlled vis-à-vis controlling—generated within them. The facilitator would then lead the discussion on to matters concerning domestic affairs, especially around gender issues—debating and reflecting on the power relationship in the household using the game as a framework. The role of the facilitator, who gears the entire session, is critical here. Not only must she have good knowledge of the context, particularly regarding cultural sensitivities, she must also possess qualities that would allow her to successfully handle a diverse group of women.

After the confidence-building exercises and after creating a sufficient level of acquaintance and trust among participants, the next phase was storytelling. This took place in groups of two where each would share a striking story about her life: problems she had encountered, challenges she had overcome, or not, and so on. Later the big group would again debate and reflect on matters stemming from the realities of their lives. According to Cohen-Cruz (2006) personal stories serve as great leveller where hierarchies can be diffused. This in turn helped to foster bonds among participants through the realization that they were not alone in facing such predicaments, a notion expressed by participants on various occasions.

After this phase, participants performed games of 'picture building' by creating a scene, spoken or not, to demonstrate an experience derived from their lives with a focus on a challenge or problem. A scene would start with a protagonist exhibiting a particular situation that she had experienced, for example, being beaten by the husband because she refused to obey him. A few others would gradually join to build the story, as the mother of the husband, the son or daughter of the protagonist, and other roles that individuals may play in such circumstances in an Afghan family. This might have involved only moves, sounds and some dialogue among the performers. The session would lead to yet another group discussion where, as the workshop

experiences revealed, everyone liked to join eagerly to share their side of the story, and to debate collectively the structural nature of the problems. For example, one such debate occurring across provinces was women's lack of access to education and knowledge, which in turn played an important role in their lack of access to employment and thus an independent source of income. In one workshop in Herat province, a woman expressed: 'the one who feeds, leads'! (interview with AHRDO practitioner, 19 June 2014, Kabul). These stories and experiences often resulted in creating a strong bond among participants, as most felt that a common condition had tied their destinies together, irrespective of other differences among them. This in turn led to a feeling of ease and relief, which played an important role in generating an environment with the kind of collective energy required for discussions and deliberations.

The final stage involved narrowing down topics out of all the issues that had been generated through various layers of discussions, and developing it into a play. Topics, broadly speaking, often comprised domestic violence; forced and young age marriages; divorce and the societal stigmas attached to it; the dominance of the male—primarily due to his position as the breadwinner; women's lack of access to education and jobs; and the problems that women themselves create for each other as mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, and so on. An interesting point that came out, however, was the role that women themselves play to 'institutionalize' gender discrimination in the family and society by raising their sons and daughters with discriminatory messages from a young age—that is, valuing a son over a daughter. Once topics were narrowed down to a few core issues, the next stage of the workshop would begin with five to seven volunteers developing a 15–20 minute play, which would highlight only the problems, and which would then be performed publicly via forum theatres.

As an example of a typical workshop in Kabul, 20 women came together who differed in age, class background, education, professional life and, more importantly, ethnicity. They gathered under one roof knowing nothing about each other or the novel methodology. For some, this was quite an alien experience to start with, and those with less education and experience outside their homes were initially rather timid and hesitant to speak their mind. However, gradually with time and experience they changed, and towards the end the diverse group of 20 women became almost one—at least one in voice. They were talking about this experience as an opportunity where they could share their stories, some of them painful; where they learned that they were not alone; where they also learned that regardless of all the differences, they could form a strong bond. They, and we all, learned that a few of the younger participants, students from Kabul University, were very keen to discuss and share philosophical and sociological topics such as citizens' roles and responsibilities and their relationship to the governing bodies, or the origin of inequality between men and women. One of the splendours of this experience was that these different levels of knowledge and education, combined with other

differences, did not prevent the group from establishing a strong bond. To the contrary, it proved a learning experience for everyone, as stated in the words of a young and energetic participant: 'during this week, I met different women and learned many things from their lives. I also learned how to be patient in life and defend my rights. I learned to share with others what I learn myself' (communicated to the author at the time of the workshop, November 2011). Another participant, a second-year university student, said:

> Methodologies were very interesting. Every day of the workshop, I was feeling more hopeful. It was so encouraging to see many women expressing their views. I was an introverted person myself before, and even at the university could not speak my mind with confidence. But here the methodologies raised my self-confidence. Moreover, I was in a community where different opinions were expressed. It was a very heterogeneous environment, with heterogeneous views. The opinions of housewives were in particular very interesting for me. They were talking about their problems, and how they were dealing to overcome challenges. Some were regretting what they had done to their own daughters, such as marriage at a young age. Some were giving very strong and good opinions. One woman's view was especially striking. She said that if she plays a role in a public scene, people in her community would speak badly about her. But she was determined to do it because she wanted to change her life circumstances. (Interview with the author, 23 June 2014, Kabul)

The workshop experience through games was arguably the stage at which the actual process of self-empowerment occurred. It was here that women had an opportunity to open up and to discuss the challenges and predicaments of their lives. They did so individually, but also realized that this was a collective experience. This is a significant aspect in a war-torn country where people, in particular women, have gone through much without any form of public acknowledgement. The workshops served as a platform with an audience who would listen to individual stories, act upon them, and exchange and share similar experiences. More notably, the women were able to move beyond the individual stories, diagnosing problems at the societal level and discussing their structural and deeper implications for women. As Cohen-Cruz points out, 'the very act of speaking one's story publicly is a move toward subjecthood, toward agency, with political implications' (2006: 104). As such, through various games at the stages discussed above, participants moved from building collective trust to raising individual self-confidence and eventually to generating collective energy and conscientization,[10] whereby,

10 Referred to also as 'critical consciousness', the Portuguese term *conscientização* was used by Paolo Freire as part of a theory of education where his emphasis lay on the notion of learning through a process of reflection and action rooted in an individual's world and cultural context.

according to Freire (1988), the poor and exploited learn to 'conduct their own analysis of their social, political, and economic reality' (as quoted by Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 2006: 2), and whereby the legislative theatre participants were able to deliberate and deconstruct power structures and societal oppression, specific examples of which will be discussed below.

Public participation through the forum theatres

Once topics were narrowed down and short plays were developed, the next critical stage was to share it with the public (women participants in this case) as widely as possible. At the end of the second week-long workshop, five interactive forum theatre plays were developed, each reflecting the local and context-specific issues faced by women. They were performed publicly by the workshop participants a total of 39 times (across the five provinces) for an audience of approximately 5,000 women that included ordinary women, university and high school students, members of women's organizations, the public at large, and occasionally officials as well (AHRDO 2012).

During the performances, issues were presented in an unresolved form—with the audience invited to suggest and act out solutions. The plays began with the performance of a scene that highlighted the unresolved problem developed during the workshops. This was followed by the facilitator's intervention that invited the spectator to replace the character on the stage at any point during the play if they believed they could perform an alternative action as a potential solution. Any member of the audience could take part, with the sole condition that they perform their idea on the stage. In each performance, the scene was enacted multiple times, with multiple interventions from various spect-actors, resulting in a dialogue about the nature of the problem raised, the various alternatives suggested and eventually a possible solution. Often a legal expert was present to document and analyse the interventions and to translate the desires and ideas into 'legal language and concrete suggestions for the legislation' (AHRDO 2012: 21).

As such, forum theatre performances served as a platform for grassroots participation and action. In the context of Afghanistan, where hardly any bottom-up initiatives for women through art-based activities have taken place, this was a major undertaking. Afghanistan has never experienced a real form of representative democracy. Even at times when representative democracy has formally existed, such as now, the reality of the country—plagued with violence, corruption, nepotism and suppression of the marginalized population—has hindered possibilities for people to exercise their will through safe and fair procedures. Under such circumstances, as Boal suggested, legislative theatre can serve as an alternative to allow the voices of ordinary people to be heard.

This aspect is particularly momentous for the women of Afghanistan who, due to traditions, patriarchal structures and the presence of conservative individuals and institutions within the system, are rarely given a chance to express

their opinions. Legislative theatre, and specifically the forum theatre, served as a public platform for women from all walks of life whose ideas, concerns, pains and voices were heard through a democratic platform. More importantly, for perhaps the first time in the history of Afghanistan, through a collective action thousands of women had a chance to engage in a dialogue about social, political and legal problems they faced and to suggest solutions to their day-to-day predicaments. This in itself was a crucial step in raising awareness, in allowing the expression of collective dissensus and, finally, in stimulating a form of self-consciousness. Highlighting this aspect, AHRDO writes in its report:

> Dialogue in this context was first and foremost an end in itself, serving a new, often deeply transformative experience for countless Afghan women who had never been asked to comment on anything other than child rearing, let alone experience any kind of public discussion in their lives. (2012: 25)

Numerous participants expressed this notion in their own words. During one of the forum theatre performances, an old woman of around 80 stood up in front of the spect-actors and said: 'Enough is enough. We women must learn from this experience. If we face oppression at home, we must stand up and demand our rights.'[11] Another participant from Bamyan province stated:

> What I learned from this workshop is that we can express our ideas whenever we want. Previously, I was thinking that people may not listen to me, but now this kind of thinking has changed. Good communication always results in good understanding, which this workshop taught me. (AHRDO 2012: 25)

A woman from Nangarhar province stated:

> This is the first time that a non-governmental organization came to this district to work with women. Apart from being a wife and a mother, women have no other social activities. This program was really inspiring. (Ibid.)

The theatrical methodologies and performances, therefore, provided the context within which the women participants expressed great enthusiasm and energy to change their life circumstances. It offered them the tools with which some of them were able to open those nuts and bolts that had impeded them from movement and progress in their lives. They also had a chance to understand the possibility of change through art, which could enable them to envision how things could be, not just how they are. The initiative was thus also a

11 Communicated to the author during a recent interview with one of the AHRDO practitioners, who had been at the event in Nangarhar in 2011 (26 March 2014, Herat).

platform where we could see the 'other' side of the Afghan woman: one with a voice, with an opinion and willingness to fight and change.

The final document

Once forum theatres were concluded, the next step was to translate the ideas, desires and suggestions into a concrete legal and policy document. The production of a final report, entitled 'Afghan Women After the Taliban: Will History Repeat Itself?' (AHRDO 2012), was therefore an important outcome of the project. The document included not only marginalized voices expressed through the legislative theatre project, but also opinions and suggestions that came through numerous consultative meetings with civil society organizations, government representatives and members of parliament, as well as the judiciary and legal experts. In Kabul and Bamyan provinces alone, more than 30 meetings were held with individuals or small groups that included members and representatives from organizations such as the AIHRC, the Afghan Women Network, the UNAMA, the International Development Legal Organization (IDLO), the Independent Afghan Bar Association and government representatives such as the Governor of Bamyan province and members of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The main aims of these meetings were as follows: 1) to introduce the legislative theatre project, which was a novel methodology for most of them, and which they found compelling; 2) to consult them on women's issues based on their experiences and expertise; and 3) to get their support on the following up and endorsement of the final report.

Moreover, background research was an important component of the work. Various documents were consulted in an attempt to identify gaps in the existing legal system, policies and practices. These included strategies for women by the government of Afghanistan, in particular the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA); laws that relate to women (in particular the Shia Personal Status Law and the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law); and research papers on Afghan women produced by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU).

The report came up with 24 policy and legislative recommendations, including issues such as providing free legal services to female victims of violence and amendment to articles 39 and 41 of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law (EVAW). Article 39 provides that proceedings are initiated on the basis of a complaint by the victim or her representative, which precludes the judicial institutions from initiating prosecution, and article 41 is ambiguous on the amount and mode of reparation to victims of criminal acts. Other recommendations included increasing women's meaningful role in key positions in the government and the judiciary, ensuring employment opportunities for women free of gender discrimination and sexual harassment, and increasing public and free educational and health-related services for women in rural areas.

The report was officially submitted to the Gender and Human Rights Committee in the Afghan Parliament. Several of the members of parliament, as well as other politicians, who were consulted about the project expressed their support. However, there was little follow up after the submission. For any effective measures to be taken up afterwards, a strong advocacy group comprised of civil society organizations and women's representatives, particularly from among those who had participated in the project, supported by certain government representatives, needed to be formed for consistent and robust lobbying. This did not materialize. As a result, an important part of the bottom-up initiative that could potentially result in a concrete legislative and political outcome has thus far remained unrealized. Nevertheless, considering that the current parliament is overwhelmingly composed of conservative elements that have been blocking progressive initiatives regarding women and personal status laws, from a symbolic angle the project offered political significance as a counterbalance enterprise.

As for public dissemination, 500 copies of the report were circulated among civil society organizations and sent to provinces where the legislative theatre project was implemented. The report received some media coverage, but beyond that it was not widely publicized. Moreover, most of the women participants remained outside this process. Only a few from the Kabul workshop took part in the ceremonial events. The AHRDO practitioners who were asked by the author for their opinions on the matter attributed the problem to the project-oriented nature of the work. This meant that once the project was completed, with the submission of the final document, and thus the allocated budget for it was finished, there was no spontaneous initiative and motivation to pursue the cause.

A platform for change and empowerment

While it is neither possible nor desirable to make a general statement, anecdotal examples of change and transformation discussed in this section point to the impact that the legislative theatre activities had on the lives of some workshop participants. This can be observed in two ways. One is the immediate, possibly only short-term, impact it produced during the workshops. The second is the longer-term transformation and change on an individual level over a period of time—however, this can be observed only to the extent that follow-up was possible. The latter aspect is important to elaborate upon before considering specific examples, and in this regard the organization was not able to systematically follow through with all the workshop participants to observe a sustainable change in the lives of women as a result of their engagement with the legislative theatre. This was also attributed to the project-oriented nature of the work, as well as to the practical limitations, such as the fact that AHRDO does not have offices and regular activities in all the provinces where the project took place. Therefore, it was easier and possible to observe the long-term transformation among the participants of the

Kabul workshops. Examples given here will therefore include mainly those drawn from the Kabul workshops. However, it is important to point out that, considering the proximity over a period of several weeks, often a strong rapport was established between the practitioner and her/his core team who were part of developing the play and the subsequent public performances. Hence, on an individual level the practitioners have been able to follow through with their respective teams, both electronically, that is, through Facebook and email, and during succeeding visits.

Short-term transformation

As pointed out earlier, in many instances, during the initial stages of the workshops, participants did not have the courage to speak up. However, gradually, to everyone's surprise, a self-transformation occurred in a number of attendees as demonstrated in examples mentioned in AHRDO's report (2012: 26–7):

> An elderly woman from Herat was initially reluctant to play a role in one of the public forum theatre plays. However, during the last day of the play development workshop, she suddenly changed her mind. When the facilitator reminded her that it was now too late for her to take part, the woman replied: 'We spoke all week about women's rights and it is now my right to participate in this performance'. She then continued to play an active role in all the subsequent performances, suggesting a powerful self-transformation.
>
> In Bamyan province there was an illiterate workshop participant who never took part in any of the discussions that took place. During the course of the theatre workshop, she gradually overcame her initial isolation and started to speak about how best to raise her problems with her family, something she had never done before. Eventually she started raising her voice more often, culminating in her publicly declaring that she had confronted her family at home and had managed to resolve her family problems. She also became one of the most active participants in the legislative theatre performances. Finally, in the concluding stages of the project, during the legislative referendum with senior government and non-government actors present, she confidently gave a public speech about women's problems and women's rights.
>
> During a theatre workshop in Mazar-e-Sharif an elderly Uzbek Afghan woman repeatedly affirmed that women [would] never be as strong as men. Yet, during one of the legislative performances, she intervened in the play and confronted the male character, letting him know in no uncertain words that men and women were born equal and should be treated as such.

These examples point to the on-site changes observed in many women during the workshops and public performances. The transformation, arguably,

occurred as a result of the activities during the workshops where the heated debates and discussions in most cases generated collective energy and voice. However, to the author's knowledge, it has not been possible to systematically follow through in an attempt to gauge the sustainability of changes and their implications for the women's daily lives at an individual, family and community level over time.

Long-term transformation

It has been possible to observe the sustainability of changes in a number of workshop participants in Kabul. Of the core group of six participants (who developed the play and performed it publicly) four will be discussed here. To begin with, two of the younger participants have joined AHRDO as active members, one as a theatre of the oppressed practitioner and another as the co-ordinator of the organization's Women's Councils in Kabul.[12] Considering that these two members are university graduates and belong to open-minded families who respect and support their choices, professionally they could have found a place anywhere in the society. However, they preferred to work with AHRDO, bearing in mind the lasting impact the workshop activities had on them, which they see as a sort of inner-self transformation. In particular, they reported how it helped them to raise their self-confidence and to feel courageous enough to perform publicly in defence of their rights and those of others. In a recent interview, one of them said: 'at the university much talking and learning takes place, but the legislative theatre had another, much deeper learning effect on me in terms of confidence building and sharing experiences with others' (24 June 2014, Kabul).

Another participant, who used to come to the workshop with her burqa and would cover her face as soon as a male member entered the room, has now become a deputy director of one of the organization's Women's Councils in Kabul.[13] In this position, she deals closely with her community's needs and concerns. Recently, she led a group of four women when they met with the Director of Education in Kabul to discuss their community's concern about a middle school in their neighbourhood that currently takes place in a rented house. Their demand was that the government should construct a permanent building instead. She was able to confront the Director by answering his questions thoroughly. Impressed by this move, the Director stated that he was not aware of the problem as the community had not reported it before, and he promised to follow up the matter. Moreover, a noticeable change has occurred

12 AHRDO has a number of Women's Councils in Kabul, with 170 members altogether, that are composed mainly of victims of war. In collaboration with other NGOs, the organization provides them with vocational training programmes, literacy courses, and human rights trainings with the overall goal of turning them into active citizens. Occasionally, workshops of theatre of the oppressed are also performed with them. All these activities are carried out in collaboration with the local authorities such as the *Wakil-e- Guzar*.

13 This is the same woman who is mentioned in a quote above as having stated her determination to change her life.

in her outlook towards women. Initially, she used to think that women should not have a choice in selecting their future husbands. Now she believes that a woman should decide by herself, and that she would let her two daughters make this choice. It is important to note that in her case, too, her husband has been supportive of her activities. However, although her son initially did not approve of what she was doing, she was able to overcome that challenge over time—not only for herself but also for her daughters. In Afghanistan, sons often play an important role in the family, regardless of their age. As sons and brothers, not only they can be controlling of their mother's and sisters' activities, but also they can influence their father's views significantly. In this sense, sometimes the struggle of a woman in the family can be manifold: first with the father, then with the husband and sometimes, such as in this case, with the son as well.

Yet another participant, who was uneducated and initially shy, has now become one of the active members of the Women's Councils. She was able to convince her husband that she would start working as a cook in an office. She is no longer the shy and isolated woman who used to seek her husband's permission every time she had to go out. Importantly, she has convinced and supported her own daughter to fight and change her unhappy family circumstances. As a result, her daughter, whose husband initially did not agree with her studies, now attends the university.[14]

Apart from the systematic observation of change that has been possible in Kabul, AHRDO practitioners through their personal contacts reported transformation in the lives of participants in other provinces as well. In Nangarhar, for example, a young woman from a remote village, after her participation, became the only woman in her family not only to buy a mobile phone but also, and more notably, to marry the man of her choice. Following the long family tradition, her father wanted to give her hand in an arranged marriage, but she was able to convince her father—who eventually agreed with her request. She called one of the AHRDO practitioners and exclaimed: 'I have done a revolution!' (communicated to the author in an interview, 26 March 2014, Herat). In Bamyan, a young participant whose family had initially opposed her entry to the university was able to convince them otherwise and started her studies. Another woman established her own small NGO to support other women with small income-generating projects.

In addition to the individual stories, the workshop participants, in particular the core group or the performing team, have not only created a strong bond and network among themselves, and meet each other as a group on various occasions, but they are also very eager to follow up on AHRDO's future activities. The practitioners interviewed for this article reported that

14 I was able to follow through these developments via the AHRDO Women's Council Coordinator who herself was one of the workshop participants (interviewed 24 June 2014, Kabul).

most of their teams' members now consider themselves as part of the AHRDO family and, on a number of occasions, have collaborated closely on other projects. More importantly, they feel that they are part of a bigger political undertaking because the result of their work has been presented to the country's parliament, despite their limited role regarding the final document (interviews with AHRDO practitioners, 20 and 24 June 2014, Kabul).

In discussing transformation, it is important to point out the role of the broader family circumstances. Sometimes, even with only one other family member who is supportive of a cause, and with persistent struggle, it is possible to change a structural situation in a family. The role of fathers, often as the family's decision maker, is particularly important. Therefore, many believe that if mothers are enlightened, they can influence their husband's thinking, which in turn will impact the entire family. Also, it is important to highlight that it is much easier for a family to incorporate changes in their lives when they live in a city as opposed to a village, where it may take much longer for a new phenomenon to be accepted as a social norm.

Finally, by way of concluding the discussion on women's empowerment and transformation through the legislative theatre project, I would like to stress that empowerment in this context must be seen as an ongoing process and a comprehensive one at that. Empowerment has been defined in a number of ways, but I would like to adopt Rappaport's definition (1984). This definition considers empowerment as a process where 'people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives' (as quoted by Zimmerman 2000: 43–4). By comprehensive I mean different layers in the process that are connected to each other like a chain. In a complex, traditional and collective-oriented society like Afghanistan, such transformations can only happen during a process, in collaboration with the community and by careful use of a methodology through a vigilant facilitator who is mindful of society's sensitive traditions and norms. The few examples of change mentioned above—both short-term and long-term—illustrate that the process of empowerment began from the moment of recruitment, where participants realized their collective participation. The process then continued to the workshops, where the actual transformation took place—and in the public performances, with the wider participation of women in a democratic space. In other words, in this understanding of empowerment, as Rappaport (1984) states, multiple levels of analysis are involved, that is, the community, the methodology, and the facilitator—each of which must be seen as part of a series of actions and steps towards achieving an end. The central point here is gaining mastery over one's life, which has been achieved in the examples of those discussed under the long-term transformation.

Such individual stories of transformation, however, have not necessarily led to structural changes in the lives of Afghan women at large. For that change to happen much more work and time must be invested—first and foremost, in girls' and women's education, and secondly, to ensure employment

opportunities as a guarantee of women's financial independence. These two issues arguably can be considered as important building blocks on the path towards women's emancipation. Central to the teachings of Paulo Freire is the importance of awareness-raising (or, to be more precise, education) in raising self-consciousness, which in turn can transform the lives of individuals from a state of oppression to one of emancipation (Freire 2005)—a point also confirmed during the legislative theatre project. Although the theatre of the oppressed, and specifically the legislative theatre project in this case, did not result in structural changes, their major contribution and added value can be attributed to the bottom-up nature of the work and the discussions, debates and ideas that it generated. Moreover, considering the importance of the community, the traditional storytelling practices and the large illiterate population in the country, theatre of the oppressed is an important tool and methodology to engage a population that otherwise would be looked at and reported upon merely as victims and voiceless. The legislative theatre project was significant in showing the agency of ordinary Afghan women to diagnose and report structural problems and discuss power relationships. In the words of Freire, it was a 'critical effort' through which women '[took] themselves in hand and [became] agents of curiosity, [became] investigators, [became] subjects in an ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the 'why' of things and facts' (2006: 90). What remains to be done is further advocacy in generating a stronger political will among politicians and members of parliament to seriously consider the recommended points in the final documents and to incorporate suggestions into policy documents and domestic laws. More significantly, to structurally change the lives of Afghan women, Afghan men's attitudes towards women's rights need to change. The second AHRDO legislative theatre project on women's rights as seen through the eyes of Afghan men, which is in its concluding stages at the time of this writing, seems to be evidence of the fact that many more such initiatives are needed to ensure participation at the grassroots level in the hope that slowly but surely a paradigm shift will take place in mindsets and one day in actions, too.

Risks and challenges

Human rights work in Afghanistan is a challenging endeavour. This gets further convoluted when the work involves addressing women's issues. Moreover, the culture of theatre, in the limited form that it exists, is still attached to a level of stigma in the conservative parts of the country, particularly for women. Therefore, a combination of human rights work with the theatre has been a daunting task for the AHRDO practitioners, especially for the women members. However, through persistent work over the years, and introducing a different genre of theatre, the theatre of the oppressed, the organization has been able to change attitudes in regard to the empowering role of theatre in places where it has carried out the work. On the other hand, considering that theatre does not occupy an important place in Afghan society, it

is not necessarily seen as a threatening tool with the potential to bring societal change. As such, this aspect can be seen as an opportunity and safety net for practitioners and participants against external critics. Nevertheless, there can be challenges and risks at various levels, of which a few are highlighted as follows:

1. Security is a serious risk, in particular when members have to travel by road to provinces such as Bamyan where the Taliban control certain checkpoints and areas. On one occasion, the AHRDO members had to immediately change their route due to a security alert they had received, in particular bearing in mind all the material that they were carrying from the workshops. On another occasion, while a public forum was going on in Nangarhar, a suicide attack took place not far away. The participants nonetheless stayed and the programme continued. In a number of instances, for example in Herat and in Marzar-e-Sharif, the practitioners have been notified of a security risk by the governor's office or another authority. As a result, they had to leave the area immediately. It goes without saying that practitioners and participants alike face such risks.
2. Another challenge, in particular in remote villages and districts, is the presence of conservative people, including the Taliban, members of fundamentalist parties, and certain religious authorities, some of whom may equate human rights with faithlessness. Thus, anyone working for the cause can be labelled as 'infidels' and 'servants of foreigners' (conveyed by a female practitioner in an interview 20 June 2014, Kabul). This may become more severe when the work involves women, in particular as practitioners. This is one of the reasons that it is vital to have a reliable local contact, one who can serve as a catalyst in smoothing relationships and establishing a level of mutual trust. Moreover, psychologically speaking, practitioners go prepared knowing that they may come across such situations, and in many instances they had to debate with the conservatives and religious authorities, often using religious examples, in an attempt to convince and change their viewpoints. On one occasion, the woman practitioner faced severe criticisms from a few religious authorities in a conservative village in Herat. She faced them by giving examples of the Prophet Mohammad's granddaughter, Zainab, who is said to have delivered an important sermon in a mosque in Kofa to hundreds of people around the seventh century. Such counter-arguments are often seen as the most powerful weapon not only to respond to reproaches but also to change minds (ibid).
3. With regard to the participants, both in the workshops and at the public forums, the same risks may apply to them as well, although to a lesser extent when it comes to criticism by the religious and conservative authorities. Security measures are taken whenever possible to ensure everyone's safety. As an example, in Nangarhar province, on one occasion, a local influential person who supported the legislative theatre initiatives provided

bodyguards at the entrance of the location of the forum theatre. On another occasion, in an attempt to block women from attending, a few religious authorities had closed the road which led to the location of the workshops. However, the director of the local council and other influential people in the neighbourhood managed to open it again. Regarding other challenges for the workshop participants, that is, after they return to their families and communities, to AHRDO's knowledge, nothing serious has happened thus far, and most participants have been able to continue their life routines. However, considering the sensitivity around theatre issues, particularly for women, sometimes participants initially would not tell their families that their training entailed theatre work. They would do so gradually and, often, seeing the positive impact of the workshop already, there was no major resistance by the family.

Recommendations

1. As mentioned already, there is a need for more serious follow up by AHRDO regarding the final document as well as with the women participants. The practitioners interviewed here all agreed that this has been a major shortcoming and that for any meaningful outcome that would lead to structural changes, persistent and systematic work needs to follow. AHRDO therefore could consider organizing a lobby group with other civil society organizations and like-minded people to take measures regarding the final document, in particular taking the opportunity provided by recent political developments in the country (although this greatly depends on how the situation unfolds).
2. During the last decade, much work in Afghanistan has been done as short-term projects, often funded by international donors. While this might have been to some degree inevitable soon after the fall of the Taliban, the strategy has faced major criticisms by those who desire to see real transformation in the country. The legislative theatre project was no exception. Notwithstanding its novelty and major accomplishments, its meaningful impact beyond the lives of those involved in the project is uncertain. The donor communities, therefore, also face a responsibility to ensure the sustainability of the works they fund.
3. Ensuring sustainability requires advocacy. Bottom-up work is crucial, but if it only remains at the level of raising awareness, it could even be damaging to those who have the necessary awareness without being able to do anything to change their life circumstances. Awareness raising and advocacy work is important in particular at the local level with the authorities and influential elements, such as the local imams and mullahs. They give regular sermons on Fridays to which people pay attention. Therefore, if they are enlightened about the question of women's rights, they can play a major role in changing minds and behaviour towards women.

4. The legislative theatre project as an experiment confirmed the need for many more such bottom-up initiatives. As one of the AHRDO members stated, promotion and publicity through media and other means is very important, but it can become meaningful only if combined with activities that will help change attitudes on an individual level. As such, many more initiatives of theatre of the oppressed are recommended throughout the country, in particular among women. Assuming that the 'Afghanization' of the theatre of the oppressed is carried out carefully—that is, considering cultural sensitivities from the recruitment stage to the public performances—encouraging more women to participate should not be an issue (as illustrated in the experience of the legislative theatre project).
5. Finally, carrying out such work, in particular among a population affected by war and conflict, has tough implications for practitioners themselves, not only physically, but also psychologically and emotionally. As such, it is recommended that provision of counselling and other opportunities should be taken into consideration for the practitioners as well. Otherwise, there are risks of emotional breakdown and other consequences.

Conclusion

As someone who has worked with various projects for Afghan women over the years, the legislative theatre experience raised many questions in my mind as to the nature and scope of numerous initiatives undertaken for the women of Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime. Is it adequate to concentrate mainly on the urban areas in the hope that the change there will also affect other parts of the country one day? Is it more important to channel funding and energy into creating income-generating projects in the hope that once women become independent economically they will also become more independent politically and socially? Or is it more germane to ask if actions divorced from efforts to promote the self-consciousness of women at the grassroots level can ever be expected to bring about change in the structural conditions of Afghan women—regardless of what we do? Notwithstanding the answers to these questions, which may well require more thorough research, one issue became clear to me through my engagement with the theatre of the oppressed: Afghan women are not silent victims. On the contrary, they are like 'sleeping lions' that once awakened will break the societal chains.[15] As I was listening and experiencing the workshops in Kabul, I could not help but keep thinking of a verse by Ahmad Shamlu:[16] 'I am a common pain, cry me out!' It was as if all the women at the workshop bore one pain, and all were united to fight and overcome this pain with one voice. This voice and fight came from

15 Referring to a poem by Meena Kishwarkamal about the women of Afghanistan, entitled 'I Will Never Return'.

16 Ahmad Shamlu (1925–2000) was a renowned contemporary Persian poet.

inside; and this and only this is what made these women different—and empowered.

Funding

This work was supported by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the AHRDO members whose insights were crucial in shaping this Policy and Practice Note as well as Brunilda Pali and Dr Sari Kouvo for their valuable comments on an earlier draft.

References

Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO). 2012. *Afghan Women after the Taliban: Will History Repeat Itself*? http://www.ahrdo.org/publication/reports/62-afghan-women-after-the-taliban-will-history-repeat-it-self.

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). 2013. Violence against Women in Afghanistan: The First Six Months of the Year 2013.

Boal, A. 1979. *Theater of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press.

———. 1992. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. New York: Routledge Press.

———. 1998. *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics*. London: Routledge.

Brigell, M. 2010. Participatory Theater and the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence. *Advocates' Forum*. University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. https://ssa.uchicago.edu/participatory-theater-and-prevention-gender-based-violence (referenced 15 July 2014).

Cohen-Cruz, J. 2006. Redefining the Private: From Personal Storytelling to Political Act. In J. Cohen-Cruz and M. Schutzman (eds), *A Boal Companion: Dialogue on Theatre and Cultural Politics*, pp. 103–13. New York and London: Routledge.

The Forum Project. 2014. What is Theatre of the Oppressed? http://theforumproject.org/whatisto (referenced 1 July 2014).

Freire, P. 2006. *Pedagogy of Hope*. London, New York: Continuum.

———. 2005. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. London/New York: Continuum.

———. 1988. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London/New York: Continuum.

Gallant, C. 2004. *Recommendations to Vancouver City Council*. Vancouver: Gallant Solutions Inc.

Human Rights Watch (HRW). 2014. World Report 2013: Afghanistan.

Kerr, D. 1991. Participatory Popular Theater: The Highest Stage of Cultural Under-Development? *Research in African Literatures* 22(3): 55–75.

Martin, R. 2006. Staging the Political: Boal and the Horizons of Theatrical Commitment. In J. Cohen-Cruz and M. Schutzman (eds), *A Boal Companion: Dialogue on Theatre and Cultural Politics*, pp. 23–32. New York and London: Routledge.

Rappaport, J. 1984. Studies in Empowerment: Introduction to the Issue. *Prevention in Human Services* 3(2–3): 1–7.

Schutzman, M., and J. Cohen-Cruz. 2006. Introduction. In J. Cohen-Cruz and M. Schutzman (eds), *A Boal Companion: Dialogue on Theatre and Cultural Politics*, pp. 1–9. New York and London: Routledge.

Search for Common Ground (SFCG). Undated. *Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation: Training Manual*. Kinshasa: Search for Common Ground.

Siddiqui, N., H. Marifat, and S. Kouvo. 2014. Culture, Theatre and Justice: Examples from Afghanistan. In P. D. Rush and O. Simic (eds), *The Arts of Transitional Justice: Culture, Activism, and Memory after Atrocity*, pp. 113–34. New York: Springer Series in Transitional Justice.

Singhal, A. 2004. Empowering the Oppressed through Participatory Theater. *Investigación y Desarrollo* 12(1): 138–63.

Zimmerman, M. A. 2000. Empowerment Theory: Psychological, Organizational and Community levels of Analysis. In J. Rappaport and E. Seidman (eds), *Handbook of Community Psychology*, pp. 43–64. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.